



KEN LOVE/The Register Star

The new 77,000-square-foot ShopKo opened in Belvidere Tuesday. Developers are hoping the new store, along with retail space alongside it, will keep shoppers in Belvidere instead of in Rockford's East State Street stores.

ShopKo takes the first step

Developers look for ways to bring shoppers to Belvidere

By **MONICA WHITAKER**
The Register Star

BELVIDERE — Tuesday's opening of a new ShopKo discount store has boosted local leaders' hopes to draw customers away from Rockford's congested East State Street strip.

Drivers will bypass the stop-and-go traffic on Rockford's East State Street if Belvidere offers convenience and a variety of shops at its Big Thunder and Little Thunder malls, said owner Jack Wolf.

The 77,000-square-foot ShopKo store will anchor Big Thunder near the corner of Beloit Road and Business U.S. 20.

Initially, the new discount store should help plug "a leakage of people in the county who shop outside the county," said Bill Luhman, executive director of the economic development group Growth Dimensions. A study estimates Big Thunder could generate \$750,000 in real estate taxes and \$350,000 in sales tax annually.

If developed properly, shoppers will look toward the city's west side

ShopKo facts

Location: Beloit Road and Business U.S. 20
Official grand opening: 9 a.m. Saturday
Size: 77,000 square feet
New jobs: 150
Corporate headquarters: Green Bay, Wis.
Total number of stores: 129

as a retail hub, Wolf said. Wolf, owner of Wolf Chevrolet, said he is taking bids from other retailers interested in sites on either side of Business U.S. 20.

SwedishAmerican Hospital has purchased six acres of Little Thunder to set up a clinic. He would not say which other companies are negotiating for space.

ShopKo analysts also see the growth possibilities of western Belvidere, said spokeswoman Sheree Olson from the company's headquar-

ters in Green Bay, Wis. The retailer's closest sites are in Beloit and Dixon. Belvidere's store will compete with K mart, Venture, Target and department stores in CherryVale Mall, she said.

Olson said the chain usually builds stores in smaller communities and "winds up attracting additional retail action."

Still, even amid opening week excitement, a few of the store's competitors and shoppers questioned how much action Belvidere will take from Rockford.

"I'll have to see," said Steve Johnson, 62, looking over dinnerware sets in ShopKo's housewares department. "I mainly shop in Rockford. Maybe if they add to whole development here."

Distance is also a factor, said Brian Teders, store manager at the Target on East State Street.

"They're a competitor, but they're far enough away that the effect is minimal. With all the retail and restaurants, East State has a regional draw."